

distress.” Because of his Masonic ties, French was saved from death by intervention from Frank Stedman, a member of the Committee of Twenty-Five, who indicated to French that he saved him because of their fraternal membership in the Masons. French was so detested because he was seen by the Democrats as “a white politician of influence with the negroes.”²⁶

The arrest and banishment of Chief of Police John Melton, Populist and leading public figure identified as a member of the Big Six in the campaign, was proclaimed by papers and Democrats. The *News and Observer* reported that he was captured amid “sensation” by a “crowd of rough riders who would have committed violence had not the military interfered.”²⁷ Jack Metts recalled in 1905 that he would “never forget how Melton looked as he sat under a tree at the Armory, he could not eat and when one of the boys went upstairs and took a rope with a noose in it and threw it at his feet, he turned just as white as a sheet.”²⁸ Melton knew that his life was endangered as a result of the campaign propaganda about the Big Six—white men identified as ringleaders of black voters—and the general attitude of white Democrats toward his activities as

chief of police. However, he continued to live and work in the city despite the danger. On November 10, Melton observed the march on Manly’s press, and, by the time the first shots were fired, he was stationed at city hall where he received reports that squads of 15 to 30 armed white men were spread out all over the city. He then was informed by an officer that “there had been a riot over the railroad and a lot of men killed.” The officer could not tell Melton how many had been killed at that point. Melton then received word at city hall “[T]hey were coming over [to] demand the offices, and take them by force if we didn’t resign.” Melton recalled that after he resigned his office, he went home and was not bothered that night. He did not leave home again until the next morning when he went back to city hall to help with the transition of the new police force led by Edgar Parmele. That day, November 11, Melton was met by G. H. Gilbert and L. H. Bryant just before a mob of about 300 armed whites surrounded the three men to take Melton and Gilbert into custody. Melton asked them why and by whose authority they were acting. In response he was escorted to Squire John Fowler who told Melton to do whatever the mob told him to do.²⁹

Melton and Gilbert were then marched up Market Street to the armory where some soldiers joined Melton’s escort. They were then marched to “near Seventh and Market” and left there for 10 minutes before being marched to the national cemetery where they were kept under guard until about 1:00 in the afternoon along with Robert Bunting. The 3 were then moved back to the armory and fed. Melton

²⁶ Other white leaders that assisted in French’s rescue were William H. Bernard, F. H. Fechtig, Henry Bauman, Henry Peschau, Henry G. Fennell, H. M. Chase, George L. Morton, Horace Emerson Sr., and M. F. Heiskel Gouvenier. According to Hayden, Fechtig, Bauman, Peschau, and Fennell were in the process of escorting Armond Scott to the train station to board the same train as French when they happened upon the attempted lynching. It is unclear when French was placed on a train; Hayden recounts that French’s train ride began on the afternoon of November 11. Contrary to this account, the *Dispatch* states that French left the city on November 10 on the 7:15 P.M. northbound train. *Hayden, WLI*, 102-3; *News and Observer* (Raleigh), November 12, 1898; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), November 11, 1898.

²⁷ *News and Observer* (Raleigh), November 12, 1898.

²⁸ “Minutes of the Association of the WLI,” North Carolina Collection.

²⁹ Melton testified in Raleigh about his experiences during the riot for the court challenge brought by Republican Oliver Dockery against John D. Bellamy for the Congressional election of 1898. *Contested Election Case*, 360-366, 382, 386.